

In The Arena

by Julia451

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Summary: "It's just another con. That was what he told himself when it became obvious what he had to do to save himself, his friend, and the entire city." What was going through Nick's and Judy's heads while they were trapped in that pit during the climax? Judy/Nick assumed but contains nothing overtly romantic except maybe at the end.

In The Arena

**Author's Note: ** Inspired by a comment from XIIith Hazard, who was hoping I'd included a scene like this in another fic._

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><p>It's just another con.

That was what he told himself when it became obvious what he had to do to save himself, his friend, and the entire city. Except for the stakes being higher than usual, it was no different from what he'd been doing for twenty years. If he could fool a cop into thinking he was a sweet, tender, innocent father, he could fool these sheep into thinking he was a savage monster. He had no doubt he could pull it off. There was no reason to worry, nothing to be afraid of.

No, what he felt when they fell in the exhibit and he realized the moment had come was not fear. It was revulsion. The thought of what he was about to do made him nauseous. How had he agreed to this? Because as hard it would be for him, the only alternative was far worse. Either he could actually let them make him kill her, or he could pretend to kill her. To hunt her like she was nothing more than a meal. To become the monster all prey saw him as. To live the nightmare he'd had so many times since they'd first learned what was happening. If Judy hadn't been in danger, he actually thought he might prefer to truly go savage â€" at least then, he wouldn't know

what he was doing. It couldn't sicken him like the mere thought of it did now.

Fortunately, he didn't have much time to dwell on it, even if the few seconds Bellwether spent taunting them felt like an eternity (the period of waiting before putting a plan into motion hadn't felt so nervewracking since he was 16). In fact, he felt calmer now. During the chase, he'd wondered what they would do if the sheep just tried to kill them both outright instead of using the serum, but the fact that they chased them into this pit â€“ where they'd be safe and Judy couldn't escape from him â€“ made it clear what their intentions were. Good â€“ he may not like it, but he could handle this. It was just another con.

"What are you gonna do? Kill me?"

"Oh, no, of course not..."

Not hard to guess what came next. He braced himself. Here it comes...

"He is!"

He'd been calm until then, but in the instant she pulled the trigger, he panicked. The horror on his face was completely genuine. He suddenly knew that it wouldn't work â€“ they'd found the berries and replaced them with the real serum! He was about to lose his mind just like those poor predators he'd seen in the hospital. It was all over! He was going to kill his best friend and was powerless to stop himself!

He curled up, closed his eyes, and breathed heavily. Am I still here? Am I still sane? he thought. Yes, he was okay. He remembered exactly who he was and what was going on. He felt nothing; there was no change. He'd been hit by nothing more than a blueberry. The second of paranoia disappeared as quickly as it came. Hoping the sheep were too far away to notice the blue juice matted in his fur, he clawed at his neck where he'd been hit until he scraped it all away, carefully counting the seconds until the "transformation" would be complete.

How did Manchas look that night? Ironic that he was now trying to remember that terrifying sight after weeks of trying to forget it! As Nick pictured how the poor jaguar had swayed and snarled helplessly while spasms had wracked his body, he also realized that Manchas hadn't known what hit him, but had this been real, he would. He went rigid like he was trying to resist, to fight it, but writhed on the ground and groaned in agony as if his reason was being overwhelmed and drowned by fear and rage. He recalled the time he'd gotten a car to hit him while on his bicycle and put on such a show of pain and injury that he'd scared the driver into paying him off so he wouldn't report it. This is no different, he told himself now. Just another con.

A low, menacing growl rumbled in his throat as he turned and looked at Judy â€“ at his prey, he forced himself to think. She's... it's nothing but food. You're hungry, you smell blood and meat, you want to kill. That was what he had to make them believe. He tried to focus on the difficulty of walking on all fours in a way that looked natural to prevent himself from thinking about what he was doing. It

would have been easier if he didn't have to look at her. He knew the fear in her eyes was an act (wasn't it?), he knew he was just putting on an act, so why did he hate it so much?

Well, since he was supposed to look like a ferocious beast in an uncontrollable fury, maybe that was a good thing. Instead of Judy, he imagined he was hunting Bellwether, Doug, or one of the other rams who had put them here. When he focused on that, it wasn't hard to bare his fangs and drool, to extend his claws as he plodded along on four legs, to lunge forward as if he wanted nothing more than to sink his teeth into their neck. He ignored how awkward and unnatural his behavior felt as he concentrated on the thought of revenge. _It's not her you're attacking_, he reminded himself. _It's them â€“ they just don't know it._

Still, he was relieved when Judy threw the stuffed deer at him and he could spend a few seconds tearing it to shreds instead of stalking her. He took as long as he could, doing his best to shut out what she and Bellwether were saying â€“ any sign of reason or awareness, and they'd know he was faking. In fact, he spent so much time on the lifeless lump of fur and stuffing, he started to worry they might get suspicious. No â€“ savage animals couldn't think, so it was actually better that he took longer to learn something he normally would have learned in a second.

But he couldn't keep this up forever. He finally tossed the distraction aside and went back after Judy... his prey. He was overcome by a fresh wave of disgust as he ordered himself to think that again. At the same time, it struck him that their audience must feel the opposite, that they were probably enjoying this. It was exactly how they saw predators â€“ bloodthirsty, vicious fiends with no restraint who would destroy everything and everyone without cause unless they were properly controlled. He was giving them exactly what they wanted! He wanted nothing more than to shout at them who had really gone savage here, but the sight of Judy stopped him. He remembered she was recording everything they needed to defeat them. Did they have enough? Would the ZPD have gotten here yet? She gave him no signal the scene was over. He had to stay in-character. _Keep it up, Nick. Never drop the act until you know you're safe, just like with any other con._

They were much too close together now. He should have been more careful not to back her up against a wall where she had no room to flee â€“ if she couldn't get away, he couldn't just wait and _let_ her get away. He'd have to... No, _that_ he couldn't do. He couldn't actually attack her! But if he didn't, _they_ would â€“ they'd find out he'd tricked them and just do the job themselves. He listened for the sounds of anyone arriving, but there were none. If he slipped up now, they could be dead before the ZPD arrived.

Judy would probably never be able to look him in the eye again, but it wouldn't be the first time. In his business, one tended to make more enemies than friends, but that had never stopped him before. He had actually been young and naïve enough once to feel guilty during some of his scams, but he'd learned to ignore dangerous emotions like that. Good thing he'd learned so well. Just like he had a million times before, he told himself, _Get over it, Wilde. It doesn't matter. Just do the job, go home, and forget about it. It's just another con..._

As she backed against the wall on her hands and back, Judy wished she could tell Nick it was almost over. Just a little longer, Nick, she urged him on in her mind. We've almost got enough. Just keep it up a little longer. She knew he hated this; she would have, too, if she'd been the one who had to pretend to attack her friend, but she'd known it was the only way.

Even so, when Nick was shot, she suddenly doubted if it had been such a great idea. She wasn't worried about her or Nick's safety â€“ even if Bellwether had suspected they'd tampered with the serum (in fact, it was most likely she had), it wouldn't have occurred to her that they would just happen to have something on them that was the exact same size, shape, and color as the Night Howler pellets. All she would have considered was that they might steal the serum, not replace it with a perfect replica. It was dark, and if she opened the gun and saw at a glance that it was loaded with little blue spheres, she would have assumed they were the serum pellets, not stopped chasing her and Nick to take the time to examine them closely enough to make sure they weren't something else like blueberries. No, they were safe on that front.

Judy's biggest fear was that she wouldn't be able to pull it off. She had full confidence in Nick â€“ she'd seen firsthand what a great actor he was. She hoped he knew she was only acting, too. What if this made him think she was still afraid of him? When they'd made the plan, she hadn't expected it would be so hard to resist the urge to tell him she wasn't really scared, that she never could be scared of him again, that she knew he would never hurt her. None of it was real, it was all fake, yet she hated doing it, running from Nick and cowering in fear of him like he was the dangerous threat she'd first seen him as. She'd never expected to feel like this, but it was too late to back out now. All she could do was make sure their attackers paid for making her do this to him.

In spite of the situation, Judy was still able to marvel at how easy it was to make Bellwether talk. The sheep really believed she was completely safe, that her opponent wouldn't survive to reveal the truth, that there was no reason to keep anything secret from her anymore, no reason not to savor the chance to brag and gloat that she might never get again. How could she be so confident? Then again, why wouldn't she be? Judy recalled something Chief Bogo had told her after the wave of panic struck the city â€“ that when mammals heard what sounded like what they wanted to hear or saw what looked like what they wanted to see, they never questioned it. This was exactly how these madmen wanted to see prey and predators, she and Nick were behaving exactly as they wanted, so they accepted it without suspicion. Maybe fear was effective for controlling people, but Judy was now inclined to think security was even more so.

"I'll dart every predator in Zootopia to keep it that way."

That was just what they needed, wrapped with a bow! Judy was about to drop the act and laugh in their faces but realized at the last second how they'd interpret that: See? We were right all along. You couldn't wait to get out of there; you were scared to death the whole time. You'd never really feel safe with a predator. It may have been petty, it may have been pointless, but she kept going. She had this absurd desire to show them just how unafraid she was of her friend, that there was no point where she wouldn't trust him. So she didn't stop until his jaws were around her neck.

"Excellent performance, Carrots," Nick told her when it was over and they were sitting on the steps outside the museum while a paramedic examined her leg.

"Wish I could say the same for you, sly fox," she said with a teasing smile, "but you didn't fool me for a second."

Nick sounded oddly thoughtful when he said, "I can see that." He paused, then added in an even more solemn tone (but still grinning), "You really weren't afraid at all, were you?"

"Why would I be? I could've have gone on for hours."

"I don't think I could've stayed in there for another second," Nick said casually.

Only now did Judy wonder how Nick had felt about the last few seconds she'd insisted on maintaining their little masquerade. It must have been horrible for him! Maybe she could be forgiven for not thinking 100% clearly at the time, but still! Her expression grew more serious, and her tone changed likewise as she said, "I'm sorry, Nick. I know it was hard for you."

"It was... until the end." Judy raised her head, curious what he meant. Her attendant got a call on his radio, and, evidently, her injury wasn't severe enough to prevent him from walking a few steps away while he answered. Nick smiled and went on: "I realized what I had to do to make it believable. I figured I'd probably scar you for life, but at least we'd both get out alive. When you started treating it like a big joke, that was when I realized... she really does trust me." Judy smiled back at him as she realized just how close this ordeal, the ultimate demonstration of trust and faith in each other, had made them. It had been just a ploy to defeat their enemy, and they'd succeeded in splendid style, but something much more important had happened. It had taught them both just how strong their friendship really was.

They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds, getting used to their new bond, before Nick revealed what he was thinking: "Yeah, it was hard... but it was worth it."

End
file.